

What Do Explorers Do When They Are Not Exploring? John Lawson's Everyday Life

By Bea Latham*

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 47:1 (fall 2007). Images may differ from those in the original article.

Historical figures often become larger than life, much like today's fictional superheroes. Through the years, stories of their actions—good and bad—get retold and sometimes exaggerated. It may be hard for us to think of them as real people: infants, students, and parents. When we think about explorers of long ago, we may imagine exciting treks through mysterious lands or action-packed voyages on the sea. But most jobs have an unattractive side. The explorer usually endured hunger, poverty, harsh living conditions, and sickness before he became famous—if he ever became famous.



John Lawson built his home on a scenic spot now called Bonner Point. Image courtesy of Historic Bath State Historic Site.

English naturalist and explorer John Lawson is no different. North Carolinians may be familiar with Lawson, since he explored so much of the state. He wrote *A New Voyage to Carolina*, an important record of his journey that describes American Indians, their dialects and rituals, as well as the area's plant and animal history.

Lawson left what is now Charleston, South Carolina, on December 28, 1700, the day after his twenty-sixth birthday,

and traveled up the Santee River in search of a place to begin a colony. Fifty-seven days later, helped by Indian guides along the way, he ended his 550-mile journey when he set foot on the grassy bank at the edge of Old Town and Adams Creeks in present-day Beaufort County. Lawson thought the fertile soil, high ground, and nearby water would attract settlers and give them a chance to successfully make new homes. Soon, ships began to arrive filled with families. The name Bath was chosen for the new settlement. Lawson—an experienced surveyor, or person who measures angles and distances to set the boundaries and area of pieces of land—laid out a town of seventy-one lots, including lots for a courthouse and a church. Merchants quickly bought the lots closest to the water. Being near a wharf allowed them to bring goods into the area. In March 1705 Bath became North Carolina's first incorporated town.

Lawson took on several important positions in the growing new town. He served as clerk of court. The Lords Proprietors in 1708 appointed him surveyor general of the colony. These positions recognized not only his abilities but his social standing, too.

Lawson also was an entrepreneur, involved in and taking the risk for several businesses. What better example could there be of a colonial real estate agent—a man with a town to build and lots to sell! Between September 26 and October 2, 1706, he recorded the sale of about two dozen lots in Bath.

With partners Joel Martin and Christopher Gale, Lawson started a horse-drawn gristmill for grinding wheat and corn into flour and meal. The mill was one of Bath's first businesses, important for the survival of residents. Bread was an important staple in colonists' diets. Community access for grinding grain would meet their needs and help the colony grow.

Lawson was a homeowner and family man. By December 1706 he had built himself a house at the corner of Water and Front streets, the most beautiful spot in Bath. From there he enjoyed a breathtaking view of the creek. He most certainly watched as ships left, laden with rich naval stores, or arrived with supplies from England. We do not have a description of Lawson's house, but he wrote about the nice bricks made in the Bath area. The homestead would have included other buildings such as a stable or smokehouse and most likely a wharf. Since Lawson was interested in plants, he was probably a busy home gardener. He wrote about growing fox grapes. He had at least one peach tree that bore fifteen to twenty bushels of fruit a year. He also boasted of a two-hundred-foot-long strawberry bed. Can you imagine a superhero tending a garden? Of course, explorers lacked special superhero powers. They had to work for food, clothes, and a house to live in.

Hannah Smith, the mother of Lawson's only known child, was the daughter of plantation owner Captain Richard Smith, one of the first settlers in Bath County and a representative to the 1697 Assembly. It is not clear whether Lawson was married to Hannah, but remaining unmarried was not unusual in the time period. The law stated that when a woman married, everything she owned automatically belonged to her husband. Hannah came from a well-to-do family with a lot of land. Not being formally married would have let her keep anything she might one day inherit. Maybe Lawson wanted to make sure that she could take care of herself if something happened to him. As another way to provide for his family, he signed a lease that gave Hannah the house, and everything else on the property, for a term of seven years. Hannah's yearly payment for the lease was to be one ear of corn, if she kept the place in good repair. At the end of seven years, if Lawson



A sketch of John Lawson's capture by the Tuscarora. The Indians eventually released Baron von Graffenried and two others who were traveling with Lawson, but killed Lawson. Image courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.

were dead, she was to keep the property during her life. On March 25, 1708, Lawson also signed over his share of the gristmill to Hannah.

Lawson's only known child, Isabella, was born in April 1707. Later that year, he bought two cows and two calves as a gift for her. Isabella also was supposed to get any offspring of the animals, possibly a way to provide her with income. About a year later, Lawson, "for the love and affection I have for my beloved daughter," gave her a 320-acre tract of land near Bath.

The shadow of death was always lurking in the lives of these early explorers and colonists. Travel was long and dangerous, and living conditions were poor. Death was respected, and people wrote wills—documents telling what should happen to their possessions after they died—early and often. Lawson's will, dated August 12, 1708, includes the phrase "I give ye remainder of my estate, both Personall & reale, to my Daughter, Isabella, of Bath Town and to the brother & sister (which her mother is w'th Child of at this present) to them Equally." Does this mean that Hannah was expecting a child when he wrote his will? Maybe not. It was not unusual to allow for the possibility that there was a pregnancy not yet known at the writing of the will or death of a parent. Making an effort to cover all possible situations showed a strong desire to provide for one's family.

By following his day-to-day life, one can appreciate that Lawson, no matter how much he sought the thrill of exploration, was still a man not so different from most. He worked to provide for his family. He loved his community and tried to make it better. Lawson was not only a true explorer but also a successful businessman, civic leader, and family man. The story of his death at the hands of the Tuscarora Indians may be the most remembered detail about Lawson, but we should not forget all of his remarkable qualities and accomplishments as a person. He was important in the history of Bath and of North Carolina.

**At the time of this article's publication, Bea Latham served as historic interpreter and assistant manager at Historic Bath State Historic Site. As part of Bath's three hundredth anniversary celebration in 2005, she coauthored the updated history of the town, entitled Bath: The First Town in North Carolina.*